

LIBERALISM, SYMPATHY AND SECURITY

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Liberals come in many different flavors: religious believers and atheists, optimists and pessimists, Kantians and disciples of Mill, ironists and prigs. What brings these different sorts of people together on the political left is their ability to put themselves in the shoes of people who are suffering. They are more easily moved to action than those on the right by spectacles of brutality, humiliation, and injustice. They do not share a world-view, but they do share emotional responses. Liberalism is a matter of the heart, rather than of the mind. The contemptuous epithet frequently hurled at liberals by conservatives in the US—"do-gooding bleeding hearts"—is a perfectly accurate description of them.

Attempts to provide philosophical foundations for liberalism are misguided. It was wrong, but not irrational, for the Greeks to hold slaves. There is no way to prove the wrongness of slavery by reference to principles the truth of which should have been evident to all thinking humans, at every epoch and in every culture. We modern Europeans and Americans are morally superior to slave-holders such as Pericles, Jefferson and various tribal chieftains in present-day West Africa. But we do not have more coherent belief-systems, nor do we think more clearly. We simply are better able to put ourselves in the shoes of the slaves.

Take some other examples: Philosophical reflection and analysis will not show that men were morally obliged to let women vote, nor that gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry. But feminism has (within limits) succeeded, and gay marriage is now becoming possible. This is because socio-economic conditions in the rich democracies provided straight males

with sufficient security and leisure to use their imaginations – to envisage what it must be like to be a woman or a homosexual. Social changes of this sort become possible only when peace and prosperity combine to provide a sense of security. This enables people to contemplate social experiments that had hitherto been unimaginable.

Except for a few sociopaths, everyone is capable of sympathy. Everybody sympathizes with the suffering of family members and close friends. Slave-owners sympathize with the misfortunes of fellow-slave-owners, and torturers with those of their professional colleagues. But in most societies, and in most periods of history, life has been too difficult and uncertain to permit people to extend their range of sympathy to those significantly different from themselves. In the two centuries since the French Revolution, however, the conditions of middle-class life in Europe and America have made it possible for large numbers of people to do so. It is not that they have become convinced by Kant that all members of the human species deserve to be treated as ends and not as mere means, but rather that they have – thanks to the comfortable circumstances of their own lives – become more generous. They have become better able to think of someone very different from themselves as a fully-fledged human being, sharing the common human fate. They have, as the philosopher Peter Singer puts it, "expanded the circle of the 'we'".

Liberalism gained ground in the United States in the period from 1945 to 1980 because, during that period, well-to-do white Americans became more able to see the similarities between their own lives, their own hopes, and their own situations, and those of other Americans. The differences ceased to matter as much as they had. So the rich became less selfish, the whites less oppressive, the males less condescending, the straights less sure that

their sexuality was a moral virtue rather than a genetic accident. These changes were due to many factors, but the principal one was the prosperity of the post-World War II era.

America has gradually swung away from liberalism in the last twenty-five years. Americans who make over \$100,000 a year are becoming less able than their parents were to put themselves in the shoes of those at the bottom of the economic ladder. They are less willing to see their tax money used to provide medical care for fellow-citizens who cannot afford health insurance. They spend more time worrying about unqualified blacks getting jobs because of "affirmative action" programs than about the wretched lives of black children in the urban ghettos.

The causes of this swing toward the right are much debated, and are hard to pin down. One is that memories of the Great Depression, which had demonstrated the need for redistribution of the social product, have gradually faded. But surely the most important factor is the growing, pervasive, and well-grounded fear of American middle-class parents that their children will never be better off, and may well be worse off, than they themselves. That fear has led to an increase in selfishness and hard-heartedness.

This steadily increasing sense of insecurity is also responsible for the amazing growth in the US of evangelical churches such as the Assemblies of God. Members of these congregations believe that a personal relationship to Jesus will ensure worldly success: Jesus will get you a job, get you out of debt, and send your children to a good college. Such people divide their fellow-citizens into the saved and the damned – those whose bodies will rise up to Heaven at the beginning of the Last Days, and those who will be left behind. Suburbanite evangelical Christians now

form the most important part of the "base" on whose support Republican politicians rely when cutting down on governmental assistance to the poor.

Europe is a far more liberal part of the world than the US, and has so far been spared this sort of parody of Christianity. The welfare systems presently in place in such countries as the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany are far superior to the weak and endangered systems in the US. Whether that will continue to be the case depends on whether the Dutch, the Danes, the Germans and the other Europeans stretch their sense of fellow-citizenship to include people whose parents came from such places as Turkey, Morocco, Bangladesh, and Sierra Leone. The frightening rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in the EU countries is more easily explicable than the marked increase in greed and selfishness that began in the US during the Reagan administration. But it is equally dangerous.

The great enemy of liberalism is fear – fear that there will not be enough to go around. The resulting sense of insecurity makes people claw back what there is, for use by people "like us". Such fear has been increasing among the middle classes of both Europe and America. It is hard to say whether the traditions of liberalism will be strong enough, on either side of the Atlantic, to overcome the fears that are undermining people's ability to see those different from themselves as fellow-citizens. It may be that the anxieties produced by the relentless flow of immigrants from the poor South into the rich North (which is as much a problem for the US as for Europe) will cause our hearts to harden and dry up. We may still profess belief in liberty and equality, but the sense of fraternity required to put these ideals into practice may gradually disappear.